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SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

By Marsha Wilson and Ellis Mount

It is obvious to information professionals that their status and that of their libraries and information centers is being questioned by their top management in a number of organizations, often with disastrous results. Fortunately this is not a universal situation. Many organizations give excellent support, and the top administrators have great appreciation for the good work being done by their library/information center staffs.

But being aware of the strong positions of many of our colleagues is not going to help those who work in organizations where top management is questioning the need for continuing the level of financial support or even the very existence of their information departments. It is not difficult to name several instances of this problem.

Even the number of library and information science programs at universities and colleges has been declining in recent years, sometimes involving some of the oldest and most prestigious schools. Evidently more than a few top university administrators have diminished their support for such departments.

There are those librarians who blithely assume cutbacks and even closing of libraries could never happen to them, and they continue with the same style of operation. While they may be right, it would be foolish to base a response to unfortunate happenings on an assumption. We must all examine what we are doing.

There are two necessary steps to take to protect your library and its position in the organization:

1. Rethink all the processes, services, collections and equipment now in use in order to replace outmoded activities and equipment with modern concepts.
2. Develop a good marketing plan that will make executives and top managers aware of what you can do for them and their departments.

Rethinking What You Are Doing Now

One of the most important steps to take is to examine how much you are doing to reach the top levels of management in your organizations. These are the people who make the decisions whether to give financial support or to discontinue the library.

For example, how many times have you provided information to the president or CEO of your company? Do you know what his/her information needs are? Does he/she call or e-mail the library regularly for information? Have you done a presentation to the directors or managers in your company within the last six months?

If the answer to any of these questions is "no" or "infrequently," it is time to manage your library, not let your library (or budget) manage you. You must become proactive or your library may become just another statistic of a library closing.

As a librarian, your expertise is identifying, locating, and delivering information. Your customers do not care whether the information you

deliver is from the Internet, an on-line source, or printed indexes. They DO care if they have the information when they need it. Having and advertising CD-ROMs, full-text information sources, and a Library Web Page does not sell the library except to those who come into the library and those who are browsing/surfing the web. These individuals are rarely the ones who support decisions for funding the library. Managers, directors, or the president/CEO make these decisions, and the decision is easy to make if they are aware only of the library budget (which to most managers is a very large black hole anyway)--they may be unaware of what the library does or can do.

While it is not enough to make your services apparent only to the top officers, (even though they represent the decision group whose support is vital to the library's continued existence), the goal should be to make your services appreciated and vital to ALL members of your organization.

To ensure managers and directors are receiving your "integral part of the company" message, provide statistical information in a way that is meaningful to them. The best method is to put your statistics in time and dollar amounts. This should show how much money and researcher's time the library has saved the company by providing the information needed for specific projects. This information can be calculated using front end loaded costs provided by your HR department. An article entitled "Avoiding the ax" by Mary Ellen Bates (1) discusses ways of

calculating data so as to show those instances in which the library was serving as a profit center. Her article also points out many ways of improving the image and the visibility of the library in management circles.

It is imperative to view your library, your tasks, and your priorities with a perspective toward change. We've heard many times that we have to learn new things constantly, but it is even more important to look at EVERYTHING we do with an attitude of expectation that it can be done easier, better, faster, and more efficiently.

Are you performing duties simply because you've always done them? At one time, in the not so distant past, it was the custom of some libraries to count how many people were in the library at a certain time, say 3 p.m. When asked why it was done, the answer was "We've always done it that way!" This is not a valid reason for doing or offering any service, especially in this era of cost accounting and justifying expenditures.

How many things do you do simply because you've done them for many years and "our customers expect" them to be done? Have you noticed a decrease in business? Are you simply responding to customer requests or are you actively seeking new business and new ways to do business?

Think about everything you do, or might be doing, in the context of "what can be done better, faster, and, ultimately, less costly."

For example, look at the condition of your library from the perspective of a visit by the director/CEO or an open house. Is your library an up-to-date,

fast-paced information clearing center, with visible signs that are clear and helpful? Is it being thoroughly utilized or is it just the best place to check the sports page or your stock portfolio?

Do you have special collections (paper or book) that were set up for some project or special interest group that is not used? Look at what you have. Stacks, piles, and crowded shelves that are not used tell the casual observer that your library is a storage facility, not a vital information gathering center. Find ways to turn such visitors into active users of your wares.

Many of your clients (probably not many of the top management people) may be using the Internet and doing online searching on their own, but how efficiently are they using modern tools? Perhaps you need to find ways to help them realize there is more to using these tools than appears on the surface. Some libraries offer training sessions during the lunch hours for those willing to sign up for the courses. Go out of your way to attract their attention and, ultimately, their support.

As you revise your activities and priorities, it is important to have a clear goal. However, this goal should be a stretch goal (one that seems at first glance to be impossible) and must relate directly to what your company is doing or is planning. It will be a moving target in that as you close in on it, it will change or you will be ready to upgrade it to something even more challenging, depending on the situation.

Instituting a Marketing Plan

Concurrently with the process of rethinking about what and how you will

do things differently is the need to develop a good marketing plan. There are many excellent articles in the literature on marketing your library, but a favorite paper is "Marketing Strategies for the Corporate Library : Spreading the Word!" by Lawrence Enoch (2). He compares a lifeless attempt at reaching library users with an up-to-date plan involving modern presentation techniques and carefully thought-out messages aimed at stimulating business for the library. He stresses the need for getting the library's services discussed in all sorts of meetings as well as in employee orientation programs. He points out the importance of concentrating on selling the benefits offered by the library rather than presenting a dull listing of what the services are.

Still another article entitled "Drumming up business" by Pearson and Jarvis (3) is worth considering. They identify the techniques they've used to make top management aware of the services available, ranging from creating the first computerized catalog of company documents the organization ever had to making heavy use of the Internet. Not content just to offer good services, they were serious about making management aware of their accomplishments. The more service they offered, the more use employees were making of the library. Many ways were found to serve their fellow employees. As the article ends, they stressed their conviction of what it takes to improve the awareness of their services, writing: "We cannot emphasize enough the necessity to advertise,

advertise, advertise--beat the electronic drum loudly and the users will come!"

We are all quite used to hearing the words "How may I help you?" when we appear as a customer in a bank or a store. We rarely give it a second thought, assuming that it is a routine part of being served by the employee. Yet it bears more thought if we consider how it relates to special libraries and information centers. It is up to us to go out of our way to find out HOW we can serve our customers, not just use a stock question when it seems convenient.

Perhaps there are ways we can serve them that they are unaware of--we often take it for granted that all our customers know what our tools and services are. Granted that some of our customers who are computer literate try their hand at using our special tools, but are they all as efficient as we and our staff are (or should be)? Some of them may accept mediocre results as inevitable, whereas an information professional might well have had better results due to having more experience and training in such searches.

If librarians and information professionals fail to take steps to keep our potential users well informed of the special skills and experience available for the asking, we should not be surprised if top management lacks an understanding of what we can do (and are doing) for the organizations we serve. We need to be skilled in advertising our wares--in making sure management is fully cognizant of the role we could play in advancing the goals of the organization.

One has only to examine the tendencies of management to choose the alternatives of downsizing or outsourcing as means of saving money to realize that our survival as a profession may well depend upon how well we keep management circles fully informed of what we do and what we can do if properly funded and supported.

"How may I serve you?" may well be one of the most important questions we should be asking all the people we are expected to serve. But superficial use of this stock phrase is not enough. It takes real effort to find out HOW they want us to serve them.

1. Bates, Mary Ellen. Avoiding the ax: how to keep from being downsized or outsourced. *Information Outlook*. 1(10): 18-21; 1997 October.

Discusses many ways to improve the image of the library in management circles and to make the library into a profit center. The need to advertise the library's value to the organization is also stressed.

2. Enoch, Lawrence M. Marketing strategies for the corporate library: spreading the word! *The Lone Star Librarian*. 49(4): 1-3; 1997 June.

Points out the need for effective marketing of the services and worth of special libraries to ensure that top management is aware of what they can do for their sponsoring organizations. Emphasizes the need to re-think what the library can do as well as the necessity for using modern presentation

techniques and materials. (E-mail: lenoch@iglobal.net)

3. Pearson, Karl M.; Jarvis, Diana J. Drumming up business. *Special Libraries*. 87(3): 163-168; 1996 Spring.

Describes the techniques of advertising used to make users aware of all the services a corporate library could provide. They offered courses in the Internet and other electronic sources, announced new services through an e-mailed newsletter, and used other techniques so that all employees were well aware of the library's worth.

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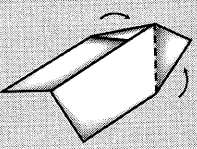
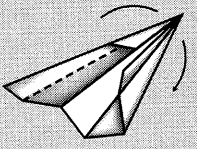
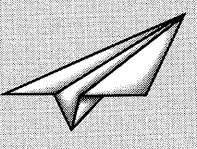
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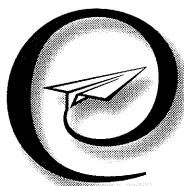
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